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*Assurance: An Austinian View of Knowledge and Knowledge Claims*

By Krista Lawlor

Oxford University Press, 2013, £35 (h/b), pp231

John Langshaw Austin (1911-60) is one of the great ‘what ifs?’ of the last 100 years of British philosophy. While one of the dominant intellectual figures of his day, his early death meant that we will never know just how influential he could have been on late twentieth-century philosophy, and what impact this might have had on subsequent developments in the discipline. After his death, discussion of his work gradually diminished, in common with a declining interest in the ‘ordinary language’ school of philosophy to which Austin is often associated. Recent years, however, have seen a boom in interest in his writings, as Austin is once more brought back into the mainstream of philosophical debate. Lawlor’s book is of a piece with this renaissance, and what a marvellous contribution to the debate it is.

The danger with any rediscovery of a Great Dead Author is that one fails to recalibrate the author’s ideas to the contemporary literature, a literature which, inevitably, has its own distinctive nomenclature and ways of mapping out philosophical debates (even while some of the debates themselves remain to a large extent unchanged for millennia). The result is that there is a disconnect between the rediscovered ideas and the contemporary debate, and the contribution of the former to the latter is underexploited. Lawlor resists this trap. She does a fantastic job of situating Austin within current thinking, particularly in terms of the kind of work at the intersection of epistemology and philosophy of language which has been particularly influential in contemporary philosophy (e.g., on the relative merits of various kinds of contextualism).

In broad outline, what Lawlor presents as the Austinian view is a kind of relevant-alternatives account of knowledge, such that knowledge requires the elimination of only a particular (but variable) class of error-possibilities. This view is tied to an account of what it is to claim knowledge, such that this involves presenting one’s audience with an assurance that what is claimed as known is true (on this view assurances involve much more than mere assertions). The position is also allied to a certain view in the philosophy of language—what is often known these days as the new relativism—and distinguished from other similar contemporary proposals of a broadly contextualist stripe. The resulting proposal is then applied to a bunch of core problems in epistemology, especially the problem of radical scepticism.

There is much to admire in Lawlor’s book, and it will surely be an influential addition to the burgeoning field of Austin studies (not to mention the contemporary debates in epistemology and philosophy of language to which her Austinian proposal is directed). While I am loath to strike a negative note about so fine a book, there is one aspect of this work that left me unconvinced, and this was the way in which Lawlor’s Austinian account is meant to respond to the problem of radical scepticism. To be fair to Lawlor, I think this is a weak point in Austin’s own discussion of this topic, and if that’s right then it’s hardly surprising that any reworking of Austin’s ideas is likely to be unpersuasive at just this juncture. Let me see if I can spell out the source of my concern on this front.

Austin—and following him, Lawlor—does an expert job of showing how very different our everyday practices of epistemic evaluation are from those in play with radical scepticism. While that might seem to in itself undermine much of the appeal of radical scepticism, it only does so if one holds that it is somehow essential to radical scepticism that it trades on our everyday practices of epistemic evaluation. That assumption can certainly seem innocuous, since if this is not so then why should we care about the sceptical challenge? As Barry Stroud once famously put the point, if scepticism

is completely divorced from our everyday epistemic practices, then the sceptic's claim that we have no knowledge sounds akin to someone arguing that there are no doctors in New York because what they mean by a 'doctor' is 'someone with a medical degree who can cure any conceivable illness in less than two minutes'.<sup>1</sup>

But there is a middle ground available to the sceptic here. In particular, one can think of the radical sceptic as applying our ordinary practices of epistemic evaluation in a thoroughgoing manner, and in this way presenting us with a 'purified' version of them. So while in quotidian contexts we are content—through lack of time, attention, imagination, etc.,—to allow knowledge claims to be rationally grounded in an attenuated fashion, once we remove these completely arbitrary constraints on quotidian contexts and apply our everyday epistemic standards resolutely, as the sceptic enjoins us to, then we are led to place much more demanding rational constraints on knowledge. On this conception of the sceptical challenge, it essentially trades on our everyday practices of epistemic evaluation even while issuing very different epistemic evaluations.

The point is that it is not enough to show that the sceptic's epistemic practices are distinct from our own; one must further block the claim that they constitute purified versions of our everyday epistemic practices. Lawlor opens her book with a quotation from Austin side-by-side with one from Wittgenstein's final notebooks, published as *On Certainty*. This is unsurprising, since there are many parallels between Wittgenstein and Austin, not least in their attention to our everyday usage of philosophically important terms. But when it comes to radical scepticism, there is, to employ Myles Burnyeat's famous phrase, 'something which Wittgenstein saw and Austin missed'.<sup>2</sup> For what Wittgenstein is keen to highlight is not just the differences between our everyday the sceptical mode of epistemic evaluation, but also to highlight how the latter is not a distilled version of the former, but rather trades on an essentially incoherent picture of the structure of reasons. Instead of showing this, Lawlor, like Austin, rests content with demonstrating the unreasonable nature of sceptical doubt in its insistence on treating error-possibilities as relevant which our ordinary epistemic practices never countenance. But on the conception of radical scepticism just offered, the radical sceptic can breezily concede that their practices of epistemic evaluation are very different from ordinary epistemic practices, and yet insist on their doubts all the same.

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<sup>1</sup> See Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 40. Stroud is here making use of an example which is originally due to Paul Edwards.

<sup>2</sup> See Burnyeat, 'Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed', *Philosophical Review* 91 (1982), pp. 3-40.